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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DAMASCUS 002338

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SUBJECT: REACTION TO SARG ARREST CAMPAIGN OVER  
DAMASCUS-BEIRUT DECLARATION, UNSCR 1680

REF: DAMASCUS 2318

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen A. Seche for reasons 1.4(b)/(d)  
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11. (C) SUMMARY: Prominent human rights lawyer Anwar al-Bunni and two other Damascus-Beirut Declaration signatories have been arrested as part of the SARG reaction against the DBD. Several others have evaded attempted arrests. One human rights activist, also a DBD signatory, questioned whether the SARG was really responding to the declaration or using it as a pretext for an ongoing crackdown, although a range of other political contacts acknowledged visceral SARG outrage about the declaration. These contacts thought the activists had severely miscalculated the impact of the declaration, given that it was released as the UN Security Council was debating a follow-up resolution to UNSCR 1559. One contact speculated that the resolution upset the regime because it came "from the inside," undercutting its attempts to portray the UN concern over Lebanon as unacceptable foreign pressure. Several contacts close to the regime also reacted to passage of UNSCR 1680, calling it an unacceptable infringement on Syrian sovereignty. End Summary.

12. (C) ANWAR BUNNI, TWO OTHER SIGNATORIES ARRESTED: Prominent human rights lawyer and activist Anwar al-Bunni, a signatory of the Damascus-Beirut Declaration (DBD), was arrested on the evening of May 17 outside his home. According to accounts by Bunni's family, his arrest took place "kidnapping-style," with unidentified security agents grabbing him as he was opening his car door outside of his home. Bunni screamed and shouted and demanded to see an arrest warrant, which, according to accounts, was not provided. In addition to those arrested May 16 and 17 (reftel), two other DBD signatories, ex-political prisoner Abbas Abbas and Homs-based activist Mohammed Mahfoud, were arrested in the last 24 hours. Meanwhile, human rights organizations are reporting that Khalid Khalifeh was detained May 17 for three hours and released. Meanwhile, signatories Kamal Sheikho and Mazen Aadi have evaded arrest.

13. (C) BUNNI, SEVEN OTHERS ARRAIGNED: Human rights activist and DBD signatory Rezan Zeituneh informed Poloff that Bunni and seven other unidentified signatories were arraigned in the late afternoon of May 18 at the Palace of Justice. Defense lawyers were unable to register for attorney privileges; however, the investigatory judges began interrogations anyway. According to Zeituneh, half of the men were interrogated while the other half refused to be interrogated without a lawyer. Zeituneh added that the men's

case had been placed in the same file as Michel Kilo's, although it was unclear whether they would face the same charges as Kilo. All eight are being held in Adraa prison. Zeituneh expects the interrogations to continue on May 20.

¶4. (C) DBD ONLY PRETEXT FOR ARREST WAVE, SAYS SIGNATORY: Zeituneh insisted to Poloff May 18 that the DBD is only being used as an excuse to arrest activists. She had been warned by senior opposition figure Riad at-Turk in March that she needed to be careful and that the time leading up to the June 15 Brammertz report would be hard for civil society. She noted that Michel Kilo was the only detainee so far who had helped draft the Declaration; all the others were just signatories. If the DBD were the true source of SARG anger, the other drafters, who Zeituneh declined to identify, would have been arrested immediately. "The authorities know who they (the drafters) are because they know who has connections to the Lebanese signatories," she claimed. Zeituneh noted her concern about the welfare and safety of the signatories who have not yet been arrested, citing a conversation between another, unidentified activist and Fuad Nassif Kheirbek, the director of the General Intelligence Directorate (GID) State Security Internal Branch (Branch 251), during which Kheirbek said that some activists would be arrested, while others would be dealt with using "other methods." Zeituneh is particularly concerned about Turk, whose uncompromising anti-regime stance -- and two decades in Syrian jails -- makes him unique.

¶4. (C) The harsh SARG reaction to the DBD drew a range of reactions from figures outside the opposition or civil society movement. Former MP Ihsan Sankar told Polchief May 18 the declaration angered the regime so much because it

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"came from the inside." It embarrassed the regime and undercut its attempt to portray U.S. pressure and UNSC's 1680 and 1559 as reflections merely of western or Lebanese interference, said Sankar. In his view the regime was also sending a message of defiance, saying "the U.S. is doing what it wants (in pressing us) and we will do what we want, and the U.S. can't stop us."

¶5. (C) Sankar agreed with other contacts that civil society activists miscalculated the vehemence of the SARG reaction. He also speculated that the arrest in particular of Kilo may indicate the partial eclipse of SMI chief Asif Shawkat's power, since the SMI chief has long been viewed as a protector of Kilo and a proponent to a degree of the view that the regime should not completely cut its ties with the opposition but should keep some bridges and lines of communication open. (Note: A human rights activist claimed to Poloff that the DBD arrests represented the final piece of evidence that Ali Mamluk, head of the General Intelligence Directorate (GID), has taken over the opposition portfolio from SMI, and was using harsher tactics.) Sankar expected the Christian community in Syria to be upset by the arrests of prominent Christian opposition figures like Kilo and Bunni.

¶6. (C) Dr. Imad Shueibi, a foreign policy specialist and regime proxy, told Polchief more arrests would follow although he did not expect all of the signatories to be detained. Most of those arrested would end up serving up to five years in prison, but not longer, he added. Shueibi described himself as astonished by the DBD. Pointing to a President Asad interview given to PBS two months ago, where he called security Syria's number one priority at present, Shueibi called the activists incredibly foolish to have issued such a declaration just as an "anti-Syrian" UN Security Council resolution was being debated. Shueibi said Syria was under threat from hostile foreign pressure and the activists had given the appearance of "helping a foreign power" with their declaration. If the DBD had been issued at a less critical time, even two months ago, it is unlikely the government would have responded with an arrest campaign, said Shueibi. Shueibi hinted that Syria is subject to a standard

no other regime in the region is held to, pointing to a newsflash that Egypt had arrested 400 members of the Muslim Brothers May 18 and adding that the U.S. would probably not issue any criticism. The arrests sent a message to the outside that if the pressure continued, there would be no more political reform, and sent a message inside that the opposition should be quiet and careful.

¶17. (C) Former Deputy Planning Minister Riad Abrash, who maintains good contacts inside both the opposition and the regime, called the DBD improper and said he himself was extremely disappointed with it. In his view, the activists who drafted and signed it had helped a foreign power and he found their actions "unforgivable." He said that he had told President Asad that everyone one of the signatories "should be thrown in prison." Although describing himself as "not pro-regime," Abrash insisted that the DBD had harmed the interests of Syria itself. He said that he had told former MP's and political prisoners Riad Seif and Ma'amoun Homsî over the phone that they both deserved to go to prison for having signed the statement. (Comment: Abrash, normally a reserved personality befitting an economist and academic, became visibly angry and emotional in offering his reaction to the DBD, at one point nearly shouting and trembling.)

¶18. (C) In addressing the arrests and the DBD, these contacts also touched on the UNSC's passage of Resolution 1680. Sankar called it a positive move and applauded the remarks made by USPermRep Bolton in support of the resolution. Shueibi and Abrash called the UNSCR an infringement on the sovereignty of Syria. Both men also noted that the U.N.'s concern about border demarcation was insincere and really focused on the Sheba'a Farms issue, as a pretext for forcing the issue of Hizballah disarmament. According to Shueibi, the arms of Hizballah are viewed by the regime as a strategic deterrent that prevented Israel from having a second front (in addition to the Golan) for invading Syria, via the passes in Lebanon southwest of the Syrian city of Homs. Shueibi also noted that Syria is determined to "play the Islamic card and set the region on fire," should the pressure on the regime become unbearable. As an alternative, he urged the U.S. to re-engage with Syria before the situation reached such a stage. In an equally truculent mood, Abrash warned

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ominously that those in Lebanon who had supported passage of the UNSCR "would pay for it very soon."  
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